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Interpreting Communities: Private Acts and Public Culture in Early Modern England

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N I C H O L A S M C D O W E L L

Interpreting Communities: Private Acts and Public Culture in Early Modern England

Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England by Pamela Allen Brown. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 263. \$19.95 paper, \$49.95 cloth.

Increase and Multiply: Governing Cultural Reproduction in Early Modern England by David Glimp. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Pp. xxvii + 230. \$21.95 paper, \$60.95 cloth.

Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England by Laura Gowing. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. x + 260. \$38.00 cloth.

Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society by Katherine A. Lynch. Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time 37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 250. \$65.00 cloth.

Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature by Jennifer Richards. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. vi + 212. \$60.00 cloth.

Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England by Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. x + 363. £70.00 cloth.

I

Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* (1609/10) points us toward some of the issues raised by the books under review here. In the opening scene, Truewit delights

in telling his foppish companion Clerimont, who has just returned to London from the court, the latest gossip in the city:

Why, is it not arrived there yet, the news? A new foundation, sir, here i' the town, of ladies that call themselves the Collegiates, an order between courtiers and country madams, that live from their husbands and give entertainment to all the Wits and Braveries o' the Time, as they call 'em: cry down or up what they like or dislike in a brain or a fashion with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority, and every day gain to their college some new probationer.¹

The Collegiate Ladies are “masculine or rather hermaphroditical” because they refuse to live according to that triple code of female conduct repeatedly advocated in the domestic manuals of early modern England and discussed at length by scholars in recent years: chaste, silent, and obedient.² Far from being enclosed by patriarchal decree in the private space of the household, the Collegiate Ladies live apart from their husbands and roam the streets and shops of London at will. However the unwomanly freedom they enjoy in the public, commercial realm of the city only confirms the cultural connection between domesticity and chastity, between the walls of the household and the sealed-off female body.³ When the Collegiates appear onstage they live up to Truewit's characterization of them as openly promiscuous, even recommending the use of contraception, “those excellent receipts” that maintain “youth and beauty” (4.4.50–53), to those younger wives whom they hope to convert to their “order.” In line with their flagrant disregard for patriarchal authority and their promiscuous, always-open bodies, the Collegiates chatter relentlessly; worse, they voice opinions, crying “down or up what they like or dislike.” Truewit returns to the issue of female opinion in act two in his fevered description to Morose of the terrible consequences of taking a wife. Morose is searching for that unobtainable ideal, the silent, and thus perfectly obedient and perfectly chaste, woman. A wife, Truewit warns him, will not only cheat on her husband and spend all his money on luxuries and fripperies, she will “be a stateswoman, know all the news: what was done at Salisbury, what at the Bath, what at court, what in progress; or so she may censure poets and authors and styles, and compare 'em, Daniel with Spenser, Jonson with the t'other youth, an so forth” (2.2.99–103).

Characteristically, Jonson asserts his own literary authority here by implicitly suggesting that his only rival is Shakespeare (whose name people are already beginning to forget beside that of “Jonson”); but equally Jonsonian is the anxiety about the exposure of his art to the opinion of the ignorant through the public market in printed books. Women by definition lacked the classical education that Jonson identified with literary and moral discrimination. Literacy was certainly not enough to license judgment, as Jonson makes bitterly clear in the pref-

ace to *The Alchemist* (1612) where he addresses himself “To the Reader” only to disparage that category and distinguish between reading and understanding: “If thou beest more, thou art an understander, and then I trust thee.”⁴ While Jonson repeatedly claimed a moral and pedagogical purpose for his work, he repeatedly disparaged the capacity of those without a humanist education to learn from it. The “College” of wives in *Epicoene* inverts Jonson’s ideal literary community, celebrated in verses such as those he wrote to be placed “Over the Door at the Entrance into the Apollo”: a coterie of learned male friends conversing freely and wittily over good food and strong drink in a private space, a reproduction of the classical symposium in the Mermaid, the Mitre and the Apollo room of the Devil. Yet for all his insistence that the value of his work could only be truly weighed in the context of what Joseph Loewenstein describes as “a private culture of connoisseurship,” the published texts of his plays and above all the 1616 folio *Workes* demonstrate that Jonson was perhaps the first to understand fully how the printed page could serve as a “sphere of self-assertion, a court of public opinion when patrons at Whitehall, or in the theatre, proved fickle.”⁵

The representation of the Collegiate Ladies in *Epicoene* introduces some themes of the books by Pamela Allen Brown, Laura Gowing, and Katherine A. Lynch: the relationship between patriarchal theory and the practice of everyday life for early modern women, the perception and regulation of the female body, and the nature of the relationships between women in early modern communities. The issues that so worried Jonson about authorship and audience and about reception and interpretation in the marketplace of print are the subject of several of the dozen essays collected by Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker in *Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England*, while the anxieties displayed by Jonson throughout his work about the moral capacity of the multitude and the efficacy of humanist culture to reproduce virtue in civil society are, according to the books by David Glimp and Jennifer Richards, consistently evident in the wider intellectual and literary culture of early modern England. The various tensions and relationships between the “court of public opinion” and matters that we now think of as belonging to the realm of the private—sexual, conjugal, and family relations, friendly conversation, reading books—link all six volumes. They are all concerned with interactions between individual and community, self and society, private acts and public culture in the early modern period—either with reconstructing the nature of those interactions or with recovering contemporary visions of the reformation and regulation of those interactions.

II

Scholarship has established that early modern women lived, as Pamela Allen Brown puts it, “in a world that granted them no legal existence when

they married and gave husbands the legal right to beat them; and unlike male children and servants, women and girls were subject to lifelong, divinely ordained subjection due to their supposedly natural propensity for evil."⁶ Yet in city comedies such as *Epicoene*, which are set in contemporary times and locations and purport to offer a realistic representation of life in early modern urban communities, women are shown leading lives independent of the authority of fathers and husbands with little or no interference. Often women in city comedies are conscious agents of the deception, ridicule, and punishment of men, while the ubiquitous jokes about cuckoldry, which seem so resolutely unfunny to us, are always at the expense of the deceived husband rather than the unfaithful wife. There seems to be a disjunction here between what social historians tell us about women's lack of agency in early modern society and the witty, plotting, assertive women that the cultural artifacts show us. Now it might be expected that the drama, as a form of commercial entertainment, would focus upon the abnormal and the heterodox to provide its audience with the pleasure of viewing the illicit; and we might assume that male playwrights portrayed unruly female behavior only to display its inevitable punishment. Yet at the end of *Epicoene* it is Morose and several other male characters who are humiliated, while the Collegiate Ladies apparently continue in their independent, promiscuous urban lifestyles: Truewit even suggests that they might like to use the young boy who has been playing *Epicoene* for future sexual entertainment (5.4.222–23). This may of course be Jonson's continued satire on the chaotic inversions of authority in the world turned upside down of Jacobean London: if women are free to behave like men, then things are really in a bad way. However, critical discussion of the portrayal of misbehaving or manipulative women in Renaissance drama has not often enough engaged with the psychology of the female audience and considered how women might have interpreted these dramatic narratives: whatever Jonson's motives, might early modern women have seen the Collegiate Ladies as role models rather than warnings of social breakdown?

In *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England*, Brown seeks "to discover how women may have taken part in revising, negotiating, or resisting ideological paradigms rather than assuming that women were tragic victims, passive ciphers, or cultural sponges" (7). Although Brown draws on a range of recent work by historians of early modern women, clearly the most important theoretical influence on her is Nathalie Zemon Davis's argument that ordinary women could appropriate early modern festive traditions of "women on top" and apply them to their domestic and public life to reconfigure traditional situations of inferiority and subordination. The transient inversions of carnival thus held the potential to effect a radical transformation of the way women lived their everyday lives.⁷ Brown follows Davis by regarding the popular, orally based culture of proverb, ballad, and jest as a reser-

voir of knowledge and experience for the non- or partially literate, and she argues that this culture transmitted examples of female agency to ordinary women. In this reading, the proverb and the ballad are carnivalesque linguistic moments that gave “non-elite women dramatic cues and scripts, a range of positions from which to speak and act” (31). In line with recent work by historians such as Adam Fox on the interface between oral and literate culture, Brown pays particular attention to the broadside ballad market and argues that ballads addressed the interests of a female audience and offered ordinary women forms of narrative that they could apply to their own lives and experiences. She then seeks to relate the tradition of female agency and resistance that she uncovers in the popular “culture of jest” to the commercial drama, which incorporated archetypes of character and narrative from this culture and which was aimed at an audience of similar social composition. This allows Brown to focus on the psychology of the female spectator and to argue, for instance, that we have failed to get the ubiquitous cuckold joke, with its frequent ascription of blame to the husband rather than the wife, because we have failed to conceive of the vicarious pleasure that women might derive from watching “the horned man’s powerlessness and social humiliation” (93).

The early modern sense of the social seriousness of play and of the transformative effects of laughter—which is evident at every cultural level in the sixteenth century from humanist dialogue to charivari—is something we have lost and hence tend to struggle to perceive. As Keith Thomas has put it in an important but underused article, quoted by Brown: “The historical study of laughter brings us right up against the fundamental values of past societies. . . . Jokes are a pointer to joking situations, areas of structural ambiguity in society itself.”⁸ Brown is to be congratulated for her efforts to excavate the social dimensions of laughter in early modern England, although she never considers how her jests might cut across, rather than demarcate, the boundaries of “popular” and “elite” cultures. Erasmus’s collection of commentaries on antique proverbs, the *Adages* (first ed., 1500), was one of his most read works, and the *Praise of Folly* (1511) is full of proverbs. It might finally be more enlightening to think about the culture of jest in terms that unite the humanist and the housewife. This would help us approach the tricky question of why young writers educated at the universities and Inns of Court were able to adapt so quickly to writing comedies for the commercial stage that appealed to unlettered men and women.

Nonetheless, Brown fluently and convincingly theorizes and exemplifies her argument, particularly in the opening two chapters, in which she looks to re-create the “everyday social spaces” of the neighborhood and the alehouse as public sites for the oral transmission of jests, with women acting not only as the protagonists of jests but as their tellers. She also makes the persuasive case that the female audience of the jesting ballad and the dramatic comedy re-created the court of public opinion in the early modern neighborhood, where women

judged whether the acts that other women performed were “honest.” Here Brown relies on an understanding of the social function of female conversation that is indebted to Steve Hindle’s formulation of gossip as both a “female sub-culture” and a “formative stage in the development of ‘public opinion’ over a whole range of issues, local and national, private and public, personal and political. To ignore gossip is to ignore one of the few channels of participation in the ‘public sphere’ that was open to women.”⁹ The many jesting tales of women getting back at violent and jealous husbands are also related to the processes of surveillance and control that operated to regulate male, as well as female, behavior in the neighborhood. Plays and jests act here as pedagogical tools, teaching women how to fight back or get their own way despite their powerless legal position. This provides a helpful new context for the humiliation in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1597) of both Falstaff, the outsider who questions the honesty of local women, and Ford, the jealous husband who poses an internal danger to the stability of the community. Equally it sheds light on a play such as John Fletcher’s sequel to *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594), *The Woman’s Prize, or The Tamer Tamed* (1611), where the local women publicize Petruchio’s vices through gossip and force him to change his behavior by dint of social pressure. However, the strength of *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep* lies in its recovery of the culture of jest as a context for the commercial drama as a form rather than its reading of particular plays, which, with the exception of *Merry Wives*, tend only to be discussed in passing.

III

The “basic distinction available for early moderns was not that of the public and the individual space,” observes Lena Orlin, “but that of the public and the shared.”¹⁰ A joke from William Hicke’s collection of *Oxford Jestes* (1671) gives us an insight into what we might call the structural ambiguity of the early modern household: “Says a Lady to her Maid, What! You are with Child? Yes, a little, forsooth: And who got it? My master, forsooth. Where? In the truckle bed forsooth: why did you not call out then, you whore? Why, says she, would you have done so?”¹¹ In *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England*, Laura Gowing points out that for most women “domestic service was the apprenticeship for wifehood and adulthood . . . much of their time was spent in close proximity to wives and husbands, together or apart” (59). Gowing shows how hard it was for female servants to “assert the body’s boundaries” in this shared and cramped domestic space. As in the jest quoted above, servants often slept, due to lack of space, in trundle (“truckle”) beds below or at the end of their masters’ and mistresses’ beds. Using the records of legal prosecutions, mainly relating to cases of pregnancy and fornication rather than the capital offense of rape, Gowing gives some dis-

trespassing accounts of how masters assumed "right of sexual access" to their servants' bodies, especially when their wives were away (62). Only when servants fell pregnant did "this kind of assumption of rights come into question in any formal arena; there was little if any context in which a servant could complain of sexual harassment, assault, or even rape" (63). This bare fact will probably not be a shock to most students of early modern history: what does shock, and also move, is hearing these women recount their personal experiences.

The great problem with the study of the lives and culture of ordinary people in the early modern period is, of course, the reliance of the historian on textual sources. Our access to the values and experiences of the illiterate is always at the remove of the text. Consequently it is difficult to discern "the extent to which the historical record of this culture has been contaminated" by the literate and might in fact be "designed to persuade, shape or even redirect opinion."¹² In *Common Bodies*, as in her previous work on defamation cases in *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (1996), Gowing shows how court records are perhaps the closest we can hope to come to hearing the individual voices of common people in the early modern period. Proverbs and jests may give us access to the accretions of a common folk culture but not to individuated personal experience. As Gowing points out, legal testimonies are not transparent records: some of the words might come from the clerks rather than the women themselves (as in those accounts which give an impression that female servants had a choice when approached by their master), while the "fictions of legal narration" draw on "a storehouse of common plots that structure experience and memory into stories that magistrates might understand" (14). Cultural historians have, of course, been acknowledging for some time that it is through language that human beings constitute and comprehend their world and their own identities within that world, necessitating the analysis of rhetoric and genre in historical sources.¹³ Indeed, legal testimonies not only drew on generic narratives but became the subject of literature in its broadest sense: the matter of news, pamphlets, and ballads. Yet the testimonies "also excelled in recording speech: not just what the witnesses or accused said, but what they said other people had said"; each story in the court records "is slightly different because each witness is at the heart of her own story" (13–14).

Despite the richness of her sources, Gowing sets herself an ambitious task: to recover early modern women's sense of their own bodies and to describe the nature of their contact with the bodies of others. Like Allen, Gowing emphasizes that while femininity was defined as private and domestic in terms of patriarchal theory, in everyday practice "women's political, spiritual, social and economic roles gave them a stake in the public life of street, community, church and nation" (29). Gowing, however, locates this female agency in the context of a more familiar narrative of oppression. Central to her argument is the concept of

women's private bodies as sites of public interest—"public secrets"—both within and without the household. Chastity, fidelity, and reproduction were public matters because they secured inheritance and property rights; consequently the surveillance of female bodies was essential to maintaining the social structures of patriarchy. Women themselves helped to secure these structures by performing a range of activities: by disciplining servants in their role as mistress of the house; by checking other women for physical signs of illicit sexual behavior, pregnancy, infanticide, and witchcraft; and by policing reproductive rituals in their roles as midwives and gossips. Women, then, were vulnerable not only to the unwanted sexual touch of men but also to the regulating touch of other women in both household and neighborhood. Indeed, one led to the other: "Single women's pregnancies concerned the whole community, threatening it with the burden of illegitimacy or the crime of infanticide; it was in the parish's interests that they were exposed. . . . Key in this process of suspicion and judgement was the expertise of women who had been mothers themselves" (45). Particularly provocative is the comparison of midwives to state torturers: withholding help until the pregnant woman told her the name of the father, the midwife similarly extracted "true words from bodies in pain" (160). *Common Bodies* is a weighty piece of social and cultural history; Gowing is particularly impressive in her historicizing of the touch in chapter 2. As with *Domestic Dangers* before it, *Common Bodies* will provide a treasury of material for scholars to draw upon: although Gowing does not call upon dramatic sources, literary critics will find many echoes of dramatic narratives in her real-life stories. My one reservation is that Gowing complicates the narrative of female subordination while repeatedly reaffirming it, and occasionally the strictures imposed by her Foucauldian perspective are too rigidly pessimistic given the evidence of female agency and authority that her own evidence sometimes presents and which she certainly would have found in other sources. The exclusive use of legal testimony is here the book's weakness as well as its strength: criminal cases are obviously going to present a negative view of life. There is no space for comedy in *Common Bodies*. The attitude toward images of women on top in jokes and the drama is revealing: "In cuckoldry jokes, women always win. In life, they did not" (178). Where Brown sees jests as in some degree reflecting and potentially shaping reality, Gowing dismisses them as pure fantasy. In the light of Brown's book, this seems too limiting an assumption.

Presumably Gowing would explain the Collegiate Ladies of *Epicoene* as merely a projection of patriarchal anxiety rather than a reflection, no matter how distorted, of a real phenomenon in Jacobean London. Yet in her study of how urban dwellers in early modern Europe built "networks of community to help them face problems of urban life," Katherine A. Lynch cites the example of the "beguines," groups of adult women in central northern Europe who exploited the practical advantages of living together.¹⁴ Although the beguines

observed practices of chastity and devotional life, they took no formal vows and preserved features of secular domestic life, including the right to retain property. The beguine movement appears to have been a secular version of the clerical model of community, developed in reaction to the dangers and anonymity of urban life. Life in such a community “provided residential and physical security” for women, compensating for the lack of family and village support (86). The “order” of wives described in *Epicoene* hardly maintains the religious values of the cloistered orders of nuns; but the Collegiates can be read as a network of community for London wives, offering strength in numbers and securing through voluntary association license to live apart from the patriarchy and exploit the freedoms of urban society.

Lynch sets out to trace the construction of “civil society” from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, defining civil society as “a public sphere where individuals forged communities . . . outside the narrow confines of household and family, but that is distinguishable from formal political life” (19). Central to her thesis, however, is the rejection of the notion of family as “a topic whose development should be considered as a topic in the history of ‘private life’” (18). Lynch sees the life of families as an integral aspect of the history of the public world, so emphasizing the interactions between individual, family, and local community in locations such as the marketplace, the workplace, and the church. This allows her to demonstrate the permeability of boundaries between domestic and public and so emphasize that women were never literally consigned to a “private” sphere of the family:

Largely excluded from the formal political sphere of public life, women nevertheless carried out important public functions: working inside the home contributing to the production of goods for sale, working outside the home as earners of wages or sellers of goods; participating in associational life. All of these activities allowed many women in towns and cities to create a relatively high level of autonomy for themselves compared to women in many other societies. (19)

Lynch’s study, which is part of the Cambridge series of Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time, provides a pan-European range of statistics and case studies which lends substance to the arguments that Brown and Gowing make, with their different forms of evidence, for the active role played by women in the public life of the early modern community. Indeed, Lynch argues that urbanization was on the whole beneficial to women because it increased the publicity of domestic life and facilitated the creation of support networks of association. These networks were often initially confessional in nature, but gradually they developed a secular character. The other important conclusion of this synthesis of recent scholarship on European family and social life (there is virtually no primary research in the book) is that “habits of

association” in civil society that have been linked to the public sphere in its Habermasian moment of Enlightenment are evident much earlier and “involved men and women from nearly all social groups above the poorest of the poor. What was new to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the increasingly secular and political tone of associational life” (220–21).

IV

Urbanization led to increasing anxiety about numbers of people and the numbers of people being made. The population of England increased from three to over five million between 1550 and 1650. There were more and more bodies in England, and they were increasingly packed into smaller and smaller spaces. King James issued proclamations against the influx of people into London, against overcrowding in London buildings, and against the expansion of the city in 1605, 1607, and 1608. However, nothing was done, or perhaps nothing could be done in the new economic conditions of the market, to prevent it. In Jonson’s *Epicoene*, Morose shuts himself in a padded room in a vain attempt to escape the constant noise of the city: hell is already becoming other people. Thomas Dekker provides us with a particularly evocative image of the crowded, noisy, and dangerous streets of London in 1608:

What swearing is there, what facing and out-facing? What shuffling, what shouldering, what jostling, what jeering, what biting of thumbs to beget quarrels . . . foot by foot and elbow by elbow shall you see walking the knight, the gull, the gallant, the upstart, the gentleman, the clown, the captain, the apple-squire, the lawyer, the usurer, the citizen, the bankrupt, the scholar, the beggar, the doctor, the idiot, the ruffian, the cheater, the Puritan, the cut-throat.¹⁵

In *Increase and Multiply: Governing Cultural Reproduction in Early Modern England*, David Glimp examines how these massive population increases led to concern among political and cultural elites about how the ever-expanding multitude was to be governed. He links the anxiety about uncontrolled biological reproduction to “the socially reproductive aspects of Renaissance humanist educational practice” (xxii), arguing that the humanist curriculum was seen as a means of producing a governing class who were to be distinguished by their capacity to regulate their own passions in the service of civic virtue. Glimp begins by discussing intersections between humanist educational culture and notions of the public good in the writings of Tudor commonswealth men, in particular Sir Thomas Smith and Richard Mulcaster. It turns out that there was as much anxiety about the overproduction of learned persons as there was about the monstrous advance of the multitude: Mulcaster was worried that if the number of literati outstripped the nation’s capacity to

provide them with the sort of roles for which they had been prepared by their education, they would join the Catholic Church: "Wittes well sorted be most civill . . . the same misplaced be most unquiet and seditious."¹⁶

Mulcaster was writing in 1581: the 1580s was to be the high point of university entry in the early modern era, giving rise to concern about the potentially subversive activities of the "alienated intellectuals" of early Stuart England.¹⁷ But clearly fear of the effects on social stability of the rapid reproduction of humanist-trained graduates was being voiced earlier. Given Mulcaster's role in promoting the humanist curriculum, we might speculate that this fear was itself a strain of humanist thought and was linked to the unprecedented opportunities of social mobility that humanism granted the sons of the middling sort. Certainly Glimp identifies a similar tension in Sir Philip Sidney's attitudes toward the success of England's grammar schools and universities. In the *Defence of Poesie*, written around 1580, Sidney makes grand claims for the pedagogical, reproductive virtue of poetry "not onely to make a *Cyrus* . . . but to bestow a *Cyrus* upon the world to make many *Cyrusses*." At the same time, he bemoans the swarms of "Poet-Apes" in England who reduce the value of poetry through their monstrously excessive scribbling, "as if all the *Muses* were to go with childe, to bring forth bastard Poets." Although Glimp does not make the point, there is surely an aristocratic disdain here for the notion that ordinary men might be raised to the level of their social superiors through access to classical literary culture. This would fit with Glimp's discussion of the hate-figure of Clinias in the *Arcadia* (1590), who "in his youth had been a scholar so far as to learn rather words than manners, and of words rather plenty than order."¹⁸ Clinias goes on to stir up the peasant revolt that nearly overthrows Basilius, underlining Sidney's sense of the subversive threat of a linguistic education in men lacking the innate nobility of the aristocracy.

Glimp's argument becomes more diffuse in the third chapter, where he first examines how both attacks on, and defenses of, the theater were united in their insistence on the pedagogical efficacy of drama. He then suggests that *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595) stages the humanist fantasy of reproducing the self aesthetically and intellectually rather than sexually, so excluding women and the domestic sphere—a comparison with the sonnets that Shakespeare addresses to the young man and their obsession with art and reproduction might have been illuminating here. Glimp goes on to argue that in the *Henriad* Shakespeare weighs contemporary arguments about "colonial governmentality," about how the few might regulate and civilize the barbarous multitude through education, such as are voiced in Spenser's *A View of the Present State Of Ireland* (c. 1596). Finally, *Henry VIII* (1613) is seen to explore the problems posed for the humanist notion of "self-sufficient male generation" by the rule of a female monarch through staging the birth of Elizabeth. The fourth and fifth chapters jump rather suddenly to Milton, focusing on *Of Education* (1644) and *Paradise Lost* (1668),

respectively. Despite the superficial alliance of Milton's views on education with those of the circle of Baconian reformers around Samuel Hartlib who sought to break up and democratize the humanist system in the service of political and religious reform, Glimp sees Milton much as Christopher Hill does in *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977), as an elitist classical scholar who was finally contemptuous of the capacities of the unlearned multitude. Glimp nicely characterizes the invocation of Orpheus in the dedication (to Hartlib) of *Of Education* as a submerged expression of the desire that Milton expressed fully in his poem to Bodley's librarian, "Ad Ioannem Rousiem" (1646): to withdraw into a privileged, all-male community of scholars "where the insolent noise of the crowd never shall enter and the vulgar mob of readers shall forever be excluded."¹⁹ The Bodleian library functions for Milton here as that ideal, private space of learned exchange that Jonson located in the Apollo room of the Devil. Glimp does not note that Milton writes to Rous in the scholarly security of Latin: the vernacular is presumably tainted by association with the vulgar mob and, as the mother tongue, with domesticity, the feminine, and the processes of procreation.²⁰ In the final chapter Glimp uses *Political Arithmetic* (c. 1671; published 1690) by the Hartlibian William Petty, a founding text of demography and roughly contemporary with *Paradise Lost*, as a commentary on and contrast with the theological treatment of procreation and population in Milton's epic. *Increase and Multiply* never quite adds up to the sum of its parts; the chapter on the drama lacks sustained argument, while those on Milton are sparse at times and needed to engage with more recent, historicized critical work. There are occasional lapses of stylistic clarity, usually stemming from the moments of Foucauldian theorizing ("disrupting the transhistorical self-evidence of interpretative matrices offered by political economy" [xix]). Nonetheless, Glimp offers an original perspective on the concept of cultural reproduction in early modern England and exposes some of the social tensions of humanist literary culture.

In *A Discourse of the Commonweal* (1581), Sir Thomas Smith depicts a conversation between representatives of different social groups about the best way to govern the commonwealth and achieve the public good. Glimp suggests that we might compare this kind of conversation to Habermas's account of the public sphere as a realm of association based on critical rational exchange; however, he emphasizes that the public sphere that Smith imagines does not stand at a critical distance from power but is "one in which the critical energies are incorporated into the functioning of government" (191 n. 73). One might add that although there might be different voices, the only person speaking is Smith. As Jennifer Richards points out in her discussion of *A Discourse*, Smith might present the text as the record of a negotiation between different social interests, but the figure of the Doctor actually manages the debate in the manner of a Socratic dialogue, suggesting that it is the humanist-trained scholar—in other words, someone like Smith himself—who is best qualified to manage the state.²¹

Nonetheless, it is in such representations of conversation by sixteenth-century humanists that Richards finds the emergence in England of a classicized concept of civic culture that seeks to reconcile the promotion of the common good with the satisfaction of self-interest. The argument of *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* is an elegant if complex one. Early modern courtesy books, which have been associated with the sycophantic and dissembling culture of the courtier, are often written in a dialogue form that is derived from Cicero and thus bears the values of classical republican culture. The English courtesy writers, according to Richards, sought to develop a native version of Roman “civil conversation” that would reconcile the Ciceronian concept of “*honestas*,” which licensed dissembling rhetoric to facilitate negotiation and resolution, with the English sense of “honesty” as plain-speaking and truth-telling. This understanding of civil conversation was derived in part from the discussion of Ciceronian “honesty” in Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561). The redefinition of a word such as “honesty” in Ciceronian terms appealed to Tudor humanists such as Smith, John Cheke, and Roger Ascham because it was in line with their project of civilizing the vernacular through a recovery of classical values—values that they also sought to introduce to English political and social life.

In essence Richards is making a claim for the centrality of sociability in Tudor humanist thought and so developing in the literary-cultural sphere the striking arguments recently made in the field of economic history by Craig Muldrew, who has shown that commerce in the early modern world, contrary to our understanding of dog-eat-dog market economics, was thought to create rather than threaten trust in others. The marketplace involved the exchange of words as well as goods; the use of rhetoric in commerce was a way of securing “credit,” ethical as well as monetary.²² At the same time, Richards draws an analogy with the incorporation of towns in the second half of the sixteenth century. The process of incorporation entailed the extension of metropolitan political and legal institutions to local communities and so facilitated an extension of participation in “conversations” about civil matters (16). Patrick Collinson’s concept of Elizabethan England as a “series of overlapping, superimposed communities which are also semi-autonomous, self-governing political cultures” or “republics” provides Richards with a model for her notion of the independent civil conversations performed in courtesy books and dialogues by humanist-trained scholars and writers, from Smith and Ascham to Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser.²³

Many of the writers discussed here came from lowly social backgrounds and were looking to secure the prominence at court and in government that they felt they deserved by dint of their humanist education. Richards is surely right to imply—very little in this book is directly stated—that their interest in classical republican forms of civility derived in part from their dissatisfaction with

what they perceived as aristocratic incivility and inequities in the distribution of power. Richards is understandably reluctant to see figures such as Harvey as alienated intellectuals driven by personal ambition and injured merit, for this is after all the image that she sets out to reject or at least complicate. But she admits that “civil conversation is a compromised discourse; it is vulnerable to the dishonest affectation of sociability and the concealment of economic self-interest” (42). The echoes of Glimp’s representation of humanism as a mechanism for dividing a ruling male elite from the unruly multitude are telling. In her discussion of Lodowick Bryskett’s *A Discourse of Civill Life* (1606), Richards shows how Bryskett transforms the dissembling courtier protagonist of the Italian conduct book that Bryskett translates into a plain-speaking English husbandman. The English language is presented as “a fitter language than Italian for planting and growing the seed of classical moral philosophy” (108). Yet the assertion of the civility of English immediately becomes a justification for the plantation and cultivation of Ireland, presumably under the government of those, like Bryskett, or Spenser, whose humanist training distinguishes them as the ideal colonial husbandmen. Equally, Richards’s concluding discussion of the preference in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) for “the productive potential of male *amicitia* over heterosexual *amor*” provides a further example of the narcissistic humanist fantasy of the cultural and textual, rather than sexual, reproduction of the self (139). As with Jonson and Milton after them, the Tudor humanists identified a male domestic sphere of learned exchange—over dinner, in gardens, in bed-chambers, in letters, dialogues, and poetry—that might transform social relations between literate men but which is defined by its exclusion of women and the “vulgar mob.” *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* is a discriminating and careful work of literary and cultural history that requires and will repay close attention. At times, though, Richards is careful to the point of becoming tentative and seems overly wary of exploring the larger historical significance of her fine analysis of the cultural politics of etymology and translation and how they could shape literary and social communities. She never goes so far as to say that the classical modes of civil conversation that she locates in Tudor humanist thought may have provided the intellectual groundwork for more “real” forms of political opposition and indeed for a discourse of English republicanism in the mid-seventeenth century. But that seems to be the subtext of the book, given the allusion in its final line to *Paradise Lost* and “defences of the commonwealth against Royalist private interest” (170).

V

In their introduction to *Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England*, Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker see humanism as conservative in its intentions but radical in its effects: “While the ideology of humanism

sought the textual production of the Christian commonwealth and virtuous subject, the practices of humanism, its curriculum of exegesis and rhetoric, opened books to alternative interpretation" (4). Sharpe and Zwicker are certainly not afraid of writing teleological history: the humanist curriculum, in tandem with the Reformation emphasis on direct contact with the Scriptures, "equipped each reader to be editor and exegete" and so "helped forge ideas of individuality" (11). This process of alternative and individual reading reaches its climacteric in the "full flood of unlicensed text and independent thought" of the 1640s (20). "Flood" is a loaded term: Dryden referred to the "the giant race, before the Flood" to differentiate the golden age of English literary culture under Charles I from the barbarous iron age of rebellion and regicide.²⁴ In the one essay in the collection that focuses on the 1640s and 1650s, David Scott Kastan makes the point that "both political and literary historians have tended to reproduce rather than analyse the Royalist narratives of the mid-century culture wars."²⁵ In their introduction, however, Sharpe and Zwicker write that "the memory and so much of the legacy of pre-Civil-War England" was "secured and preserved" by readers during the 1640s and 1650s, who set about "collecting and circulating" the threatened artifacts of Renaissance culture. These acts of preservation facilitated "an apparently seamless restoration of old cultural forms" (18). This reads like a paraphrase of the post-Restoration polemic most influentially disseminated by Dryden, who, having written in praise of Cromwell, had pressing personal reasons for erasing the cultural achievements of the republic. The dramatic new picture of the literary life of England in the 1640s and 1650s revealed by critics such as Nigel Smith and David Norbrook over the last decade is here eclipsed by the old and discredited royalist narratives of catastrophe and survival.²⁶

Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England is in many ways a more traditional collection than it claims to be. Bold claims are made in the introduction for the revolutionary implications of "a new history of reading" that "stresses continuous transactions between producers and consumers, negotiations among a myriad of authors, texts and readers" (3). This new history of reading, we learn, covers a great deal: the status and intention of the author, the material production of the text, its visual and physical form, its distribution and acquisition, its reception by different people and at different times, theories of audience, the politics of writing and the politics of reading, censorship and freedom of speech, gender relations, the physicality of reading, and much more. Most of the concerns of the other books under review here also appear in passing in the introduction to this collection. Apart from references to the humanist desire to produce ideal subjects through reading and pedagogical mimesis, we learn that while for the "modern sensibility the body is the last preserve of the personal and the private," a reading of the "discourses of early modernism reveals rather the body as political site and public

domain" (15). We are also told that despite the patriarchal social structures of Tudor England, "the unruly woman was no doubt the audience for, as well as the subject of, popular ballad and comic drama" (14). My point is that the "history of reading" emerges less as an original concept that will inspire a new generation of interdisciplinary criticism than a catchphrase for what is already happening in early modern literary studies. Or indeed what has always happened. In his essay on readings of Revelation, Kevin Sharpe insists that he is not offering "just a history of biblical interpretation" but a history of "the ways in which readers read or were thought to read Scripture."²⁷ However, there is no clear theoretical or analytic distinction between his chronological survey of the ambivalence of attitudes toward Revelation in the seventeenth century and the many previous book-length discussions of apocalyptic thought and commentary in early modern England. It is only in the final lines of his essay that he offers an innovative "next move" by suggesting that we need to consider whether the decisions made by collectors such as Elias Ashmole and Anthony Wood when they bound their books together might disclose their attitudes toward particular texts or arguments.

Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England is less, then, a groundbreaking new development in early modern studies than a collection of stimulating, diverse essays on the politics of literary culture. In a quirky but eloquent contribution, Seth Lerer examines the humanist origins of the errata sheet. He uses the relationship between the publication of errata and the admission of heresy in the publications of Sir Thomas More to shed light on the processes of self-correction in Sir Thomas Wyatt's poetry and prose. Heidi Brayman Hackel tackles the difficult issue of the role of books in the lives of early modern women, who rarely left a written record of their response to the books they read, whether in marginalia or commonplace book or published text. Acknowledging her lack of evidence, Hackel speculates that women may have most often demonstrated their engagement with books less through reading than through the physical processes of organizing, cataloging, and bestowing books. Joad Raymond, on the other hand, produces a great deal of evidence in his discussion of attitudes toward reading the news for the early modern idea that reading had physiological consequences and could dangerously arouse the passions. Adrian Johns emphasizes how reading operated as social gesture in the world of the Royal Society, where the objective validity of scientific experiment was concluded through a process of reading and discussion among the virtuosi that Johns terms "experimental civility" but which we might call peer review. The scientific "conversation" of the Royal Society recalls the civil conversation of the Tudor humanists: criticism is regarded as compliment, and reasoned disagreement is seen as the key to progress. In a fascinating essay, Johns shows how Newton was the first to abandon the conventions of experimental civility. The theme that binds these essays and the others

in the collection is less that of reading than the interaction between private and public. Kastan emphasizes that Parliament did not shut the theaters in 1642 because of an enduring Puritan antitheatrical prejudice but rather because “theatres were places where private people not only came together but came together as a public” (179). No attempt was made by Commonwealth or Protectorate to censor the printing of the texts of plays, despite the fact that these texts were often hedged with royalist polemic in prefatory epistle and poem. Plays were no longer dangerous when they became books and were “privatized” by their reading. Finally, Zwicker’s ambitious attempt to trace the relationship between reading habits and the development of the concept of opinion raises questions of chronology. He sets out to explain why “the recognition and the critique of opinion as a sphere of social exchange” emerges in the late seventeenth century with “the fashioning of increasingly passive consumers of texts” (295). He quotes from a satirical sketch of 1693 called *The Humours and Conversations of the Town, Expos’d*, which ridicules the world of the coffeehouse where fops and beaux “joust for social distinction, and delight in the creation and application of opinion”: “Another, that understands not so much English as to write a Billet-Doux, shall, with the help of reading . . . Mr. Dryden’s Essays of Drammatic Poesis, or some of his Prefaces, give you Critical Observations on the Greek Poets; when all the Knowledge is of the Labours of those I have mentioned.”²⁸ As we have seen, Ben Jonson satirically represented the exchange of such unthinking and uneducated literary opinion among Londoners as early as 1609—worse still, among women. Is the “pacification of opinion” really then a symptom of the new possibilities for social and intellectual exchange offered by theater and coffeehouse in the late seventeenth century? But then again, *Epicoene* was the first play to be staged when the theaters were reopened at the Restoration.

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Notes

1. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.1.66–74. All subsequent references are to this edition.
2. See, e.g., Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1988).
3. Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 123–44.
4. Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, 213.
5. Joseph Loewenstein, “Martial, Jonson, and the Assertion of Plagiarism,” in Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England*, 279, 287.

6. Brown, *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep*, 12.
7. See Nathalie Zemon Davis, *Culture and Society in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
8. Keith Thomas, "The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England," *Times Literary Supplement*, January 21, 1977, 77.
9. Steve Hindle, "The Shaming of Margaret Knowsley: Gossip, Gender, and the Experience of Authority in Early Modern England," *Continuity and Change* 9, no. 3 (1994): 393.
10. Lena Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 185.
11. Quoted in Brown, *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep*, 36.
12. Tim Harris, "Problematising Popular Culture," in *Popular Culture in England, 1500–1800*, ed. Harris (London: Macmillan, 1995), 6, 8.
13. See, e.g., Lynn Hunt, "History, Culture, and Text," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
14. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Early Modern Europe, 1200–1800*, 84.
15. Thomas Dekker, *The Dead Terme* (1608), quoted in M. St. Clare Byrne, *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country* (London: Methuen, 1961), 92.
16. Mulcaster, *Positions* (1581), quoted in Glimp, *Increase and Multiply*, 35.
17. The classic study is Mark H. Curtis, "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England," *Past and Present* 23 (1962): 25–43.
18. Sidney quoted in Glimp, *Increase and Multiply*, 37, 41, 59.
19. Milton quoted in *ibid.*, 144.
20. For a stimulating account of humanist attitudes toward the mother tongue, see Wendy Wall, "'Household Work': The Sexual Politics of Domesticity and the Advent of English Comedy," *English Literary History* 65 (1998): 1–45.
21. Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness*, 103–4.
22. See Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998).
23. Patrick Collinson, *De Republica Anglorum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), qtd. in Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness*, 19.
24. Dryden, "To my dear friend Mr. Congreve on his Comedy Call'd the Double-Dealer" (1694), line 5.
25. David Scott Kastan, "Performances and Playbooks: The Closing of the Theatres and the Politics of Drama," in Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, Society, and Politics*, 170.
26. See Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640–1660* (London: Yale University Press, 1994); and David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
27. Kevin Sharpe, "Reading Revelations: Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Politics in Early Modern Britain," in Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, Society, and Politics*, 123.
28. Quoted in Zwicker, "The Constitution of Opinion and the Pacification of Reading," in Sharpe and Zwicker, *Reading, Society and Politics*, 296.